



Willem van Aelst, *Still Life with Dead Game*, 1682. 36.1

Willem van Aelst

1626–1683

VAN AELST was a pupil of his uncle, Evert van Aelst (1602–1658), a still-life painter in Delft. His father held the respected position of *Notaris* in Delft; hence, it is likely that Van Aelst came from a wealthy family. He joined the town's Saint Luke's Guild on 9 November 1643. Swillens has determined that Van Aelst was a Catholic; otherwise little information is known about his personal life. From 1645 until 1649 he lived in France and subsequently in Italy until 1656. While in Florence, Van Aelst worked as an assistant to the Dutch still-life painter Otto Marseus van Schrieck (1619/1620–1678) when that artist was employed by the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Ferdinand II de Medici. Van Aelst eventually received a gold medal and gold chain for his service. In 1656 he and Van Schrieck returned to the north. After a short period of time in Delft, Van Aelst moved to Amsterdam, where he remained for the rest of his life. At his death he left a wife and three children.

In 1672 Van Aelst was one of seven Dutch painters, including Van Schrieck, who were asked to judge the merits of a collection of Italian paintings sold to the great elector of Brandenburg by the Amsterdam art dealer Gerrit Uylenburgh. They declared the paintings worthless.¹ The flower painter Rachel Ruysch (1664–1750) was a student of Van Aelst's, and he influenced a number of other artists, including W. G. Ferguson (1632/1633–after 1695), Elias van den Broeck (c. 1650–1708), and Simon Verelst (1644–1721).

Van Aelst specialized in still-life painting, but within this genre he was quite versatile, painting fruit and flower pieces, and, above all, hunting scenes, with dead game and hunting gear. This type of picture became very popular after mid-century. Van Aelst seems to have been particularly influential in the development of this genre; his paintings were greatly praised and fetched high prices.

Notes

1. Bredius 1886: 41–46.

Bibliography

- Houbraken 1753, 1: 228–230, 358.
Swillens 1946.
Bergström 1956: 220–224.
Bol 1969: 324–327.
Montias 1982.
Sullivan 1984: 51–56, 70–72, 97.

1982.36.1 (2858)

Still Life with Dead Game

1661

Oil on canvas, 84.7 x 67.3 (33³/₈ x 26¹/₂)
Pepita Milmore Memorial Fund

Inscriptions

At lower right: *Güill.^{mo} van. Aelst. 1661.*

Technical Notes: The support, a fine-weight, plain-weave canvas that has been lined, has been trimmed slightly at the top and sides. A thin, smooth, brownish beige ground layer was applied overall. A slightly darker imprimatura lying under the dead game was employed as a mid-tone.

The image was constructed with various layers of opaque paint of thin to moderate consistency as well as with glazes. The overall condition of the painting is excellent, with losses confined to the edges and the hare's muzzle. Thin upper layers and glazes are moderately abraded, particularly in the pouch and strap, bas-relief shadows, and background, and often expose the ground. Abraded rooster and partridge feathers have been retouched. No conservation treatment has been carried out since acquisition.

Provenance: Dr. C. J. K. van Aalst, Huis-te-Hoevelaken, by 1939; (sale, Sotheby Mak van Waay, Amsterdam, 18 May 1981, no. 489); (Richard Green, London).

VAN AELST DEPICTS a number of dead animals hanging above and resting upon a stone ledge, on which also lies a blue and gold hunter's game pouch. The animals are painted very precisely, and most of them can be identified. The largest are a European hare (*Lepus europaeus*) and two roosters, one white and one dark. Hanging before the legs of the hare is a European partridge (*Perdix perdix*). Suspended in the upper left with two falconer's hoods are an adult kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) and a common wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*). The third bird in this group, which is only partially visible, has not been precisely identified. These animals must have been killed by a falcon as no bullet wounds are visible.¹

The tightly cropped and carefully orchestrated composition is characteristic of Van Aelst's paintings from the 1650s and 1660s. Through his use of light, color, and texture, Van Aelst focuses our attention on the animals and game pouch. The dark background gives the scene a somber, almost brooding quality. The impact of the painting, however, comes from its extraordinary illusionism. Van Aelst care-

fully records the various textures of the fur, feathers, stone, and satin, and even includes a fly on the rooster's comb.

Such paintings may have been collected by rich burghers who owned game parks and hunting lodges. Sullivan has argued that these paintings appealed to the aristocratic aspirations of the Dutch burgher because hunting and falconry traditionally had been a pastime of the Dutch court.² The diversity of animals indicates that Van Aelst composed the scene from a repertoire of studies that he had made after specific models. Virtually the same kingfisher, for example, hanging in a similar position, occurs in a signed and dated 1664 painting (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, inv. no. NM 301). The game pouch is also found in other Van Aelst paintings, such as *Still Life with Game and Hunting Gear* (Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe, inv. no. 350).

That Van Aelst's painting was intended to represent the general theme of the hunt rather than the spoils of a specific hunt is evident from the relief depicting Diana and Actaeon on the front of the stone ledge. Diana, visible between the shoulder straps of the game pouch, leans over to splash water on Actaeon. He recoils, but stag horns are already sprouting from his head. Van Aelst's relief is based on one of the most famous mannerist compositions, Paulus van Vianen's gilded silver plaquette of 1612 (fig. 1).³ The exquisite works of both Paulus and his older brother Adam elicited great admiration in the seventeenth century, and their silver basins and ewers frequently appear in paintings by Dutch artists. Intricate silver vessels, similar to those created by the Van Vianens, occur in a number of Van Aelst's flower still lifes. As Klessmann has pointed

out, artists included these finely wrought objects in their biblical and mythological paintings as symbols of worldly treasures that should be forsaken for more lasting values.⁴ In this instance, since Van Aelst has depicted a stone relief rather than the gilded silver plaquette, he emphasized instead the thematic relationship of the story of Diana and Actaeon to the hunt.⁵

The juxtaposition of the relief with the dead game may have also been chosen for moralizing reasons.⁶ The story of Diana and Actaeon was frequently interpreted in Dutch seventeenth-century literature as a warning against succumbing to sensual pleasure. Actaeon's downfall resulted from his unregulated desires that led him to overstep the bounds of chastity by peering at Diana.⁷ The partridge, rabbit, and rooster hanging above the relief are all animals that, like Actaeon, are associated with unbridled lust.⁸ Thus, the unusual array of animals in this trophy painting may have less to do with the specifics of a hunt than with the underlying iconographic content of the painting. The entire scene, painted with such trompe l'oeil illusionism, probably also alluded to the transience of sensual pleasure.

Notes

1. George E. Watson, curator, Division of Birds, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, letter, 13 July 1982, in NGA curatorial files.

2. Sullivan 1984, 41–42; and Sullivan 1980, 236–243.

3. Inv. no. 14745. The connection with Van Vianen was pointed out to me by Joaneath Spicer. For further information on Van Vianen's work, see Duyvene de Wit-Klinkhamer 1955; Amsterdam 1979, 42–54.

4. Klessmann 1981, 367–372.

5. Van Aelst included this relief in at least two other paintings, *Still Life with Poultry* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. A1669) and *Still Life with Game Pouch* (art market, London, 1993).

6. For the following analysis I am indebted to Pamela Hall, who, as a graduate student at the University of Maryland, analyzed this painting in a seminar report in 1987 (in NGA curatorial files).

7. See Sluijter 1986, 168–187.

8. The most comprehensive assessment of the symbolic implications of dead birds is De Jongh 1968–1969, 22–74. See also Philadelphia 1984, 184–185, 251. For a genre painting with sexual overtones where the same types of dead animals occur see Hieronymous van der Mij's *A Kitchen with a Servant Girl and Two Boys* (Derekamp, Stichting Adwina van Heek, Huize Singraven), repro. in Leiden 1988, 171.

References

- 1936 Moltke: 50, pl. 11.
 1984 Sullivan: 91, note 32.
 1985 NGA: 17, repro.
 1988 Grimm: 172, reprints. 115–117.
 1992 NGA: 134, color repro.

Fig. 1. Paulus van Vianen, *Plaquette with the representation of Diana and Actaeon*, gilded silver, 1612, Utrecht, Centraal Museum

